

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Boggart

by
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Book Information

Susan Cooper, The Boggart
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After visiting her family's castle in Scotland and returning home to Canada, twelve-year-old Emily finds that she has accidentally brought back with her a boggart, an invisible and mischievous spirit with a fondness for practical jokes.

Award: Carnegie Medal/Honors; Misc./Other; Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Children's Literature; Nestlé Children's Book Prize/Smarties Book Prize; State Award

Topics: Canadian Content, Canadian Content (All); Countries/Regions, Scotland; Humor/Funny, Practical Jokes; Mysteries, Hauntings/Ghosts; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8

Main Characters

Barry a sixteen-year-old high school dropout who helps Jessup get the Boggart back to Scotland
Devon MacDevon (the MacDevon) the last head of the MacDevon clan and an occupant of Castle Keep; he enjoyed the Boggart's practical jokes
Dr. Stigmore a sour-tempered psychiatrist who believes Emily is responsible for the Boggart's mischief
Duncan MacDevon an ancient member of the MacDevon clan whom the Boggart loved
Emily Volnik a twelve-year-old girl who becomes aware of the existence of the Boggart; she is blamed for the trouble it is causing
Fergus the MacDevon's dog
Jessup Volnik a ten-year-old computer-wiz who is able to find the help to get the Boggart back to Scotland
Maggie Volnik Emily and Jessup's mother; she owns an antique shop

Mr. Maconochie the lawyer handling the MacDevon estate; he purchases the castle when it is put up for sale

Mrs. Cameron Tommy's mother, who works as a storekeeper in Scotland near Castle Keep

Robert Volnik Emily and Jessup's father; he is the director of a small theater in Toronto

the Boggart a spirit who revels in practical jokes and lives by his own rules

Tommy Cameron a young boy in Scotland who knew the MacDevon and the Boggart; he befriends and corresponds with Emily and Jessup

Willie Walker and Dai Rees two good-natured, Welsh born actors in Robert's theater troupe who explain to and counsel Emily about boggarts

Vocabulary

cowed intimidated

fastidious meticulous; showing careful attention to detail

fecklessness irresponsibility

incredulous doubting or disbelieving

poltergeist a ghost that makes itself known by creating disorder

Synopsis

At the opening of the story, Devon MacDevon, the elderly man who is the last of the MacDevon clan in Scotland, dies peacefully in Castle Keep on Linsmore Island. Robert Volnik, an artistic director of a theater in Toronto, is informed he has inherited his uncle's castle. The Volnik family travels to Scotland to visit their ancestral home and settle the estate. They are unaware the castle contains a boggart, one of the Old Things with a spirit of Wild Magic, who enjoys playing tricks on people. Tommy Cameron, the son of a Scottish shopkeeper, is the only one who knows of the invisible Boggart's existence. When the Volniks arrive, Tommy takes them to the castle by boat and slowly comes to befriend Emily and Jessup, the Volnik's children.

The Volniks' intrusion awakens and upsets the Boggart, who escapes the confusion by unbaring a door to a dangerous part of the castle. When the

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family hears the massive timber barring the door drop from its rests, they investigate, and Emily nearly falls into the collapsed part of the castle. Shaken, the Volniks decide to sell the castle rather than keep it. Maggie Volnik, Robert's wife and an antique shop owner, arranges for several pieces of furniture to be shipped to Toronto and allows each of the children to choose a piece to keep. Emily chooses a roll-top desk, and when she closes the lid, the Boggart is inadvertently trapped inside, for he cannot escape a door with an iron lock.

The Volniks quickly return to the regular routine of their lives in Toronto. This routine is interrupted when the furniture from Scotland arrives, and the Boggart is freed when Emily opens her desk. The Boggart is curious and enjoys the new foods and strange devices in the Volnik home. The MacDevon castle had no electricity or phone, and the Boggart enjoys learning how the new devices operate.

The Boggart's goal is to have the children recognize his existence and then live in comfortable appreciation of each other. His tricks start innocently enough, hiding things, moving things, and tying shoes together. But when the Boggart leaves the house with Jessup or Emily, his tricks grow to a larger scale. He accompanies Jessup to school and out on the hockey rink where he trips a boy, and Jessup is blamed.

On Halloween, Emily goes to the theater to get her costume and tells Willie, an actor, of some of the strange things happening in her house. Being of Welsh origin, Willie explains to her about boggarts. That night, the Boggart begins throwing objects at Mrs. Volnik, who is dressed up as a witch. The Boggart mistakenly believes he is protecting the house from an ancient Celtic hag. Emily, Jessup, and Jessup's computer club friends, get blamed for the incident. Emily tells Jessup what she learned from Willie, and the Boggart, listening nearby, is thrilled he is finally recognized and touches their cheeks in appreciation.

Emily and Jessup must help dust the antique shop as punishment for their trouble. While there, the

Boggart wishes to entertain them and orchestrates a dance of objects in the store. Maggie screams when she sees it, and the children flee the store, afraid they will be blamed again. A psychiatrist, Dr. Stigmore, who is a customer, smiles as he feels he has just witnessed a poltergeist in action. The children run to Robert's theater and take refuge there, entering unnoticed during a rehearsal. The lights begin to act strangely and then perfectly echo the emotions and mood of the play, and everyone in the theater is spellbound. Willie talks to Emily and Jessup afterwards and encourages them to go home because he knows the Boggart will follow them. He fears that the Boggart, not realizing his potential for destruction, will begin to wreak havoc with modern technology. Willie is proven right when, on the way home, the Boggart plays with traffic signals. In the confusion, a car hits Emily, and she is hospitalized with serious injuries.

Jessup is concerned and while reflecting, realizes Tommy knows about the Boggart's existence. He calls him and learns more about the Boggart. After being released from the hospital, Emily begins her recuperation at home. Tommy sends condolences and pictures of Scotland, which she hangs in her room. Willie comes to visit when Maggie goes to work, and he refuses to allow Dr. Stigmore to enter the house even though the doctor claims the Volniks have retained him to analyze the problem.

When the Boggart awakens, the pictures in Emily's bedroom make him homesick, so he enters Jessup's computer and writes in Gaelic that he wishes to go home. When Dr. Stigmore visits, the Boggart is angered and begins to throw objects at him. Dr. Stigmore is ecstatic and wants to take Emily to a psychiatric unit for observation. The mood in the Volnik house becomes somber.

Looking for the Boggart, Jessup discovers him inside his computer game headed for certain destruction as he approaches a black hole. Jessup does not know how to get him back and enlists the help of his friend Barry to solve the problem. They realize they cannot recover the Boggart by conventional means and decide to track him into the

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black hole. Instead of crashing the program, they find the screen filled with a picture of Castle Keep. They save the game and mail the disk to Tommy who is instructed how to retrieve the Boggart from the program. The Boggart is released in Scotland and flies to Castle Keep, where he is content once again.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why is Tommy so unfriendly towards Emily and Jessup at first?

Tommy is probably feeling both protective and jealous. He was the one who not only knew about the MacDevon and the Boggart, but had discovered the death of the MacDevon. In some ways, he probably wishes Castle Keep would become his, for he loves it and appreciates and understands the Boggart. So when Emily and Jessup arrive, claiming ownership, he feels both jealous of their inheritance and a bit judgmental toward them, for they do not appreciate the castle as he does.

Literary Analysis

How does the weather in Scotland mirror the changing moods of the story?

The main impression the Volnik family has of the British Isles is somberness, which is reflected in mist, rain, and grayness. But there are moments when the sun shines through and the land seems magical. In many ways, this is what life is like when the Boggart comes to live with the Volniks. He causes many problems for them, and their lives at times seem troubled and gray. However, there are moments when his good intentions shine through, such as when he orchestrates a dance with objects and takes over the theater lights. It is in these moments that the sun shines, and his magic is appreciated.

Inferential Comprehension

What does Maggie eventually realize about her dealings with Barry?

Maggie realizes she really does care about Barry and what he is doing with his life, but she has never communicated that in a constructive way. She had only made snide remarks to him or to Emily and Jessup about him. Maggie finally realizes her rudeness on the morning when Barry is at the Volnik home. She decides she will now try a more positive approach to encourage him to finish school.

Constructing Meaning

How would you feel if a boggart moved in with you?

Reactions will differ. Many students may say they would welcome the visitor. It may add some spice to their everyday lives, and they may enjoy some of the confusion one would bring, especially if a joke was played on one of their parents or siblings. They may have difficulty, however, if the joke is on them.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The story explains that the Volnik family first travel to Prince Edward Island for a vacation and then visit Britain and Scotland. As a geographical exercise, obtain a map of both North America and Europe. Have the students find Toronto and then trace the Volnik family's journey in the order in which they travel. Have the students choose a vacation in Toronto, Prince Edward Island, or Scotland and plan a travel itinerary for themselves.

Extending Meaning There are a number of scenes in the story that could be illustrated for use on the book jacket. Have the students review the book and list various scenes and events in the story. Then instruct the students to choose two or three items from the list and illustrate them using the descriptions in the story and their own impressions of the characters. Display the work in the classroom.

Comparing and Contrasting Even though this story makes some good-natured fun of

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psychiatrists, much progress has been made in the field of mental health. Many of the past stigmas about mental illnesses have disappeared as science reveals the causes of various mental diseases. Have the students research and write a brief report about how mental disorders were diagnosed and treated in the past and how they are diagnosed and treated in modern times.

Understanding Dialogue When Emily awakens in the hospital, she has a list of questions running through her mind that she wishes the Boggart could answer. Using those questions as a starting point, and adding some of their own, have the students write a dialogue that they would imagine taking place between themselves and the Boggart.